

FOR LOVE OF COUNTRY

BY

**DR. THE HONOURABLE RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**



**[Address to the Nation on the occasion of the 36th Anniversary
of Independence at Victoria Park, St. Vincent and the
Grenadines on Tuesday, October 27, 2015]**

Office of the Prime Minister
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Anniversaries are always occasions for mature reflection, stock-taking, recommitment, and resolving to do better than before. We routinely do so on our birthdays, wedding anniversaries, school reunions, and on New Year's Day. On our nation's birthday, October 27th, we ought to do the same.

First, let us spare a thought, and more, for all of our citizens and residents who have lost loved ones this year. I am reflecting particularly on those families who have had to endure the pain and anguish caused by the deaths and serious injuries of family-members, especially on the roads and through criminal violence. My heart continues to be pained and anguished for the families of the children who died in the Rock Gutter tragedy and other road traffic accidents. Care on the roads is an absolute necessity; we must do better in this regard.

Still, we thank God for life and living. And we are grateful to Him that we have been spared, thus far this year, the ravages of any hurricane, storm, or landslide.

At the same time we celebrate the successes of our nation and its people in all walks of life. The successes of our students and working families please me greatly. We are truly thankful to God.

Fifty-four years ago, the President of the United States of American, John F. Kennedy, at his inauguration ceremony, placed a vital matter before his people for their consideration. In simple, yet powerful language, he pleaded: *“Ask not what your country can do for you; as what you can do for your country!”* I adapt those words today: *Ask not what St. Vincent and the Grenadines can do for you; ask what you can do for SVG!*

It is natural for human beings to focus their attention daily on what is to be done for themselves as individuals, for their spouses, their partners, their children, and their families. And there is absolutely

nothing wrong with that. But this personalisation of everything ought not to be what daily consumes our time and efforts. We have obligations to our country, our young children, our parents, our families, our workers, our employers, our students and teachers, the elderly, our national community, our Caribbean, and to Mother Earth globally. These obligations are always to be exercised through the prism of our reaffirmation that our Nation is founded on the belief in the Supremacy of God and the freedom and dignity of man and woman.

So, today, let us focus our attention on this the 36th anniversary of independence of St. Vincent and the Grenadines on Love of Country. Inescapably, this Love of Country embraces our love and caring for each other, even to love those with whom we have differences, complaints, and grievances. The positive vibe of such a love conquers the array of negative human sentiments including the vanities of selfishness, greed, hatred, jealousy, political and religious divisiveness, and the love of power. These human vanities are much easier to vent, to display, to act out; but that which is so easy is often very wrong. Loving may be difficult, but it gets easier

and more natural if we practise it daily, hourly; it then becomes a part of us ___ a noise in our blood, and echo in our bones. Those of us who are leaders must resolve, and act accordingly, to raise aloft the Power of Love, not the Love of Power! But this is not the business only of leaders; it is for all of us. And we must learn ever more to respect each other! We must become reconciled to each other. Love is the handmaiden of reconciliation. Love helps tremendously in the easing of social alienation; it is the balm which soothes and heals the aching wound of alienation from even one's true self.

How do we then marry our innate, or inbred, individualism with a quest to uplift the collective national community? How do we move from the condition of an isolated or separate individual concerned largely or mainly about "self" to that of a social individual which integrates in a socially-beneficial way the individual interest with that of the wider community? The starting point to make the whole the divergent interests of the individual and those of the national community, is to lift our social consciousness through the process of learning and teaching in the family, the school, the church, the

workplace organisations, civil society groupings, the trade unions, the political parties, and the formal governance structures. I repeat: The starting point to making us whole is an on-going process of an uplifting socialisation through the learning and teaching of the truth about life, living, forgiveness and redemption. That learning and teaching become solidified over time in altered behavioural patterns and codified rules of engagement, including appropriate laws. And we must learn to make ourselves whole out of the compromises which we were. In this small country, too, we must learn to comprise without compromising our principles. In short, we must be practical and sensible.

Our nation's history, geography, demography, and biology have moulded us to become who we are. Britain's assumption of suzerainty of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 1763 presaged a profound disruption of the process of indigenous socio-economic evolution. European conquest and settlement in St. Vincent and the Grenadines were accompanied by native genocide, forced deportations of the indigenous people, and the enslavement of Africans, the awful legacies of which continue to manifest

themselves in our underdevelopment. St. Vincent and the Grenadines is at the forefront of the focussed regional demand for reparations from Britain for its perpetration of native genocide and African slavery. We consider that Britain has a legal and moral obligation to partner with us in a structured way to repair the awful legacies of underdevelopment arising from its organised policy of native genocide and African slavery. Britain and ourselves must have a mature, non-confrontational conversation on this matter of healing and recompense in a quest to build a better humanity.

The emancipation of slavery in 1838 heralded socio-economic and political possibilities for the former slaves. Much has since been achieved, but these possibilities are yet to be fully realised. Indeed, the realisation of these possibilities is still a central reason for our pursuit of the sustainable development goals to uplift our nation.

Our population mix was augmented in the post-emancipation years through the recruitment of indentured labourers from Portuguese Madeira (1845 -1850) and India (1861 – 1881). Much later, in the 20th century and continuing, other nationalities, including our Arab

brothers and sisters, have come to us voluntarily from overseas. We have welcomed them all. Through the fever of history, our society has in unity, despite occasional dissonances, emerged as a veritable symphony of oneness. Metaphorically, we are songs of the Calinago and the Garifuna; we are the rhythm of Africa, the melody of Europe, the chords of Asia, and the home-grown lyrics of SVG itself. All this has been part of our commendable contribution to the evolution of our Caribbean civilisation regionally, and to humanity globally. We must not take this accomplishment for granted; we must therefore resist stoutly those who ill-advisedly and carelessly seek to use ethnicity as a basis for citizenship. This folly inevitably induces demagogues, including some from overseas and in our diaspora, who ignobly try to divert us with dangerous mirages. Thankfully, they have been wholly unsuccessful.

Our nation's arrival at independence in October 1979, was built upon the historic struggles of our people. Important signposts have been the anti-colonial war against the British by the indigenous peoples; the unleashing of the social democratic revolution through the anti-colonial uprising of October 1935; and our achievements of

universal adult suffrage in 1951 and internal self-government in 1969. Through it all, ordinary men and women, from all walks of life have helped to build our country into what it is today. We revere them. Our distinguished political leaders, particularly our National Hero the Right Excellent Joseph Chatoyer, George Augustus Mc Intosh, Ebenezer Joshua, , Robert Milton Cato, our nation's founding father, Sir Vincent Beache, and Sir James Mitchell, have all contributed immensely to our nation's development. We remember them today with gratitude. So, too, our thanks go out to our other leaders and contributors in all areas of life, living, and production.

Undoubtedly, our nation has made immense progress since independence in 1979. On every index of material measurement there have been tremendous accomplishments. We see these advances before our very eyes in terms of human development, education, health, housing, physical infrastructure, including a Jet Airport and international airport, technology, communication networks, poverty reduction, wealth creation, sports, culture, and good governance. Still, too many of our citizens have been left

behind; every effort must be made to right this wrong, to lift this profound burden. Nevertheless, there is a grave danger that we may succeed in eliminating material poverty and achieving zero hunger but experience a poverty of the spirit and a hunger of the soul. An elemental and enduring love for our neighbour and our nation who are before our eyes daily, and a treasured love for our Heavenly Father who we do not see physically, are required more than ever to propel us forward as a good and caring community.

Repeatedly, I have stressed too, that no nation has ever progressed without disciplined, smart, quality productive work by its people in all spheres, in the private and public sectors. Progress cannot be built on leisure, pleasure, and nice time, enjoyable and necessary all of that is for a fuller life and living. Our hands and brains must not be idle; there is always something useful and productive to be done. I know that the vast majority of our people believe that it is by the sweat of their brows that they eat bread. Our people overwhelmingly accept that laziness is an absence of virtue; indeed, laziness is a vice that has to be vanquished for our success to be more assured. Our people reasonably expect, too, that they should

enjoy just economic rewards for their labour. Equally they know that this expectation, as always, is grounded in the availability of resources to deliver the most optimal rewards for labour.

Our government has followed these precepts since we were elected to office in March 2001. The record shows that in times of both relative plenty and relative scarcity, we have looked out for the working people, self-employed persons, our patriotic entrepreneurs, the public servants, the vulnerable, the poor, and the marginalised. They know that they can always rely on us to do our best. That is why in difficult or challenging times they have shown not only admirable forbearance but a mature understanding in applying their hearts to wisdom.

Despite the cumulative blows to our country of the global economic meltdown of 2008, and continuing, and five significant adverse weather events between 2010 and 2014, the BAICO-CLICO debacle of 2009, and continuing, and the drastic diminution to the point of complete removal of the preferential market treatment for our bananas in the United Kingdom, our nation has kept things

together and has thrived. Our resilience and fortitude in the recent challenging years have been a tribute to our remarkable people acting in concert with wise leadership. Although our nation is not yet out of the proverbial woods, things are getting better and the prospects for next year, and beyond, are very encouraging.

I remind everyone that despite our challenges, our government has not laid off public servants; indeed, we have hired more in vital areas to better serve the people. Wage and salary improvements have occurred; and we have paid public servants on time. Some of the other OECS member-states have not been able to do all this. And in a neighbouring CARICOM country which has long been hailed as a model nation, over 4,000 public servants have lost their jobs and the remainder have not received a salary increase since 2008! Similarly, in a European country from which historically we have received some aid, its public servants have not had a salary increase for over five years. In St. Vincent and the Grenadines, our blessings ought to be counted one by one. We thank Almighty God.

The concerns of every group of people in our society must be addressed and their interests sensibly advanced within the context of a just and balanced society. Our government has made sure that no group has been left behind and especial attention has been accorded to the most vulnerable and deserving. Workers, farmers, fisherfolk, public servants, business people and entrepreneurs, practitioners in culture and sports, and professionals of one kind or another have been in our focus. Similarly, the young, the old, women and men, the poor and the indigent, have been within the targeted compass of our government's public policies. We continue to elaborate, and implement, policies and programmes in all these respects, and more.

Accordingly, today I make the following announcements of relevance:

First, the government recently established the statutory mechanisms to review minimum wages for all categories of workers. Cabinet is expected to receive the recommendations in the New Year which will surely result in an increase in minimum wages.

Second, my government has determined, after consultation with the public sector trade unions, to grant an increase in salaries and wages for all categories of workers, pensionable and non-pensionable, in the public service for the year 2015, retroactive to January 01, 2015. This increase is modest at 2.5 percent, but it is tax free. The cost to the Treasury amounts to approximately \$7.25 million. This wage and salary increase will be paid in the December 2015 pay packet, on Friday, December 18, one week before Christmas. In January 2016, there will be a further wage/salary enhancement of 1.5 percent. There are thus no increases for the years 2012, 2013, and 2014. The representatives of the public sector unions and I arrived at this sensible and mature understanding in a meeting between us on Tuesday, October 20, 2015. I intend, too, in 2016 to create an additional number of senior graduate teaching posts from the current 65 to a number closer to 100 to facilitate further upward mobility to these beneficiaries of the Education Revolution.

Third, the deserving persons who receive monthly public assistance payments will receive an increase of \$25 per month from January 2016. This will cost an additional \$1.5 million approximately, per year, in the aggregate.

Fourth, an Actuarial Review of the National Insurance Services (NIS) is currently underway. I expect that this review will, among other things, recommend increases in minimum pensions and other benefits from early 2016.

Fifth, my government has awarded a record number of 31 national scholarships, national exhibitions and bursaries (14 national scholarships, 5 exhibitions and 12 bursaries) arising from the 2015 CAPE/“A” Level examinations. In 2016 these numbers would be further augmented for government-assisted university education through the award of 70 tuition scholarships and grants, at least 100 specially-designed loans to our university students under the Economically-Disadvantaged Student Loan Programme, and other assorted scholarships, grants, and payment of economic cost to dozens more of our university students. Over \$30 million (inclusive

of the student loans) will be spent directly by the government next year on post-secondary college and tertiary university education. Currently, we have 2,500 students at our Community College and over 1,000 pursuing university education through the efforts of our government. We are on target to achieve “One College or University graduate, on an average, per household” by 2025.

Sixth, in another week or so, 745 students who graduated at the appropriate level at the CAPE and CXC Examinations will each receive \$500.00 as a monetary reward for their performance. I have further instructed the SVG Community College to provide me with a list of those students who successfully completed their Associate Degree Programmes in 2015 at the average level of a B+ grade and above. I intend to make the same \$500 payment to each of these qualifying students at the Associate Degree level.

Seventh, I have recently given approval for the SVG Community College to recruit 80 qualified persons ___ I have increased the number from the original 65 ___ as the next batch of students to enter the Division of Nursing Education to pursue the requisite

nursing qualification. My government will continue to pay these nursing students a monthly stipend of \$1,000 while providing them a free professional education.

Eighth, in my government's 2016 budget to be delivered in January 2016, we will accord all Nursing Assistants the status of pensionable public servants. They deserve it. They will thus be put on the same footing, in this regard, as Registered Nurses.

Ninth, our annual Christmas Road Cleaning Programme will start shortly. I expect some 4,500 persons will be engaged in this short-term works programme at a cost of \$3 million. A special short-term employment programme, too, of some 150 persons will be instituted by the SVG Port Authority to assist with the additional activity at the Port in the on-rush of the busy Christmas season.

Tenth, the duty-free concessions on the importation of Christmas barrels will commence on Monday, November 09, 2015. This is the 15th consecutive year that my government is granting these concessions.

Eleventh, between now and Christmas 2015, our government will distribute a further 200 or so building lots of land to deserving persons at preferential prices. This is an on-going programme in our Housing Revolution. Since 2001, we have distributed over 4,500 such building lots. This is absolutely amazing!

Twelfth, our government is committed to providing direct financial and other support to Vincy Heat in its football World Cup Campaign. I am personally involved in this. Yesterday, I had a further conversation on the matter with the President of the SVG Football Federation, Mr. Venold Coombs. On Friday, October 29, 2015, Vincy Heat will journey to the United States of America to take on that country's team in a World Cup Qualifying Game which will be played on November 13, 2015, in Missouri. The USA comes to SVG for the return game on September 06, 2016. What a weekend that would be with our overseas nationals and visitors arriving at the Argyle International Airport on regular and chartered flights to be with us for a few days of football, sports, and culture. The world would be watching St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Thirteenth, the farmers and fisherfolk will again, for the third year running, in 2016, have available to them a further \$6 million in low-interest loans through the Farmers' Support Company financed by Petro Caribe.

And now to my fourteenth announcement: My government has instituted an admirable policy of appointing sporting and cultural ambassadors with the privilege, among other things, of carrying a diplomatic passport. This group of ambassadors are persons of merit and quality who have distinguished themselves in the fields of culture and sports. This year I announce a few more such Ambassadors: In sports ___ Lance John (cricket), Ezra Hendrickson and Marlon James (football), Esther Robinson, Stella Winsboro, Peggy Hull, Stella Boyea and Gailene Windsor (netball), and Adonal Foyle (basketball); in culture ___ Wollis Christopher, James "Jamesy P" Morgan, Carlton "CP" Hall, Olson "Caribbean Pete" Peters ___ all in the area of popular music (soca and/or calypso) and Bridgette Blucher (gospel music).

In the next few weeks or months, our people will exercise their democratic choice in free and fair elections as to who would govern us for the next five years. I expect that the campaign would be robust, and full of humour laced with biting Vincentian picong, educational, and uplifting as befitting a mature people in quest of further ennoblement. I expect, too, that the campaign would be peaceful. I am sure that our people are not interested in malicious utterances, scurrilities, falsehoods, and vacuous posturing. The people are demanding substance and a clear exposition of comprehensive, compelling narratives for our country's development. My government has already laid out its own perspective in its National Economic and Social Development Plan 2013 to 2025 which was launched in October 2013 and is available on the government's website. If any citizen has any queries about this Plan, I invite them simply to: "ASK RALPH"! This Development Plan covers every single facet of public policy and is the benchmark against which all other developmental narratives would surely be assessed!

As always, our government's plans for the future are grounded in the human development of our people, of which education and training, health, housing, citizen security, poverty reduction, zero hunger, and social protection are central. Over the next five years, a number of capital projects, already in train will be fully rolled out: the imminent actual operation of the Argyle International Airport; the Geothermal Project; the relocation and modernisation of the Port and Cruise Ship Pier; the construction of an Acute Referral Hospital at Arnos Vale and the further modernisation of the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital; the commencement of the construction of the modern city at Arnos Vale; the building of the National Stadium; the re-development of capital city Kingstown; the rolling-out of the most ambitious programme ever for the construction or reconstruction of roads, bridges, sea and river defences; and the facilitation of the private sector in planned expansions in agriculture, fisheries, tourism, manufacturing, medical schools, information technology, and the creative industries. This is an exciting programme of immense importance for wealth and job creation.

There are many other matters upon which I am tempted to speak. But I shall leave them for other times and other fora, including the campaign trail.

Before concluding, I reiterate my central theme today that the foundational building bloc in the further development of our nation is an ENDURING LOVE. This love has always to be accompanied by an optimistic hope for our future, and a faith made perfect by deeds. This enduring love demands that we help each other to be good, to be the best we can; it involves not wounding each other, for if we do, we wound ourselves. These wounds come in diverse forms: Through the malice of mind, the force of the hand, the negligence of the action, the unsavoury lash of the tongue, and the vainglory of a vengeful spirit. These wounds are hurtful and damaging to all. Those who mock the quest for love and caring are hardening their hearts and opening the door to the bad side of human spirit. As Pastor George Frederick has correctly urged us in his excellent book, recently-published, we must stop the fruitless, needless, unloving, and ungodly bickering.

So, let us rejoice in love for each other and our nation, under God, at Independence 2015. Let us, as the Apostle Paul advises in his Letter to the Philippians: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God.”* [Chapter 4, verse 6]. This advice will guard our hearts and minds. This reflection opens up an understanding which provides the basis for a settled wisdom. And as the Book of Proverbs instructs us, this wisdom *“will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendour.”* [Chapter 4, verse 9]. That will lift us all and give us a victory again and again!

Happy 36th Anniversary of Independence, SVG!

Thank you!